

Why Incidents of Tiger Straying in Sundarbans Can Hit Mangrove Conservation Efforts



The situation must be handled carefully, otherwise, it will be difficult to gain local support in any mangrove restoration activities.

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The tiger population is increasing, but as per the 2015 India State of Forest Report, Sundarbans had only an 8 sq. km rise in the forest cover. (Representational image: Shutterstock)

Forest authorities are struggling to locate the Royal Bengal tiger (*Panthera tigris tigris*) that has strayed in the Gosaba island, South 24 Parganas, West Bengal, and killed one goat, cow so far. Over the period of the last 15 years, the tiger has never strayed so deep. Locals say that the tiger is following the mangrove plantation patch along with the islands. These mangroves were restored by forest authorities through their plantation programmes. A similar situation is echoing across the Indian Sundarbans, this winter. There are several tiger straying cases at different islands — Kultali, Kumirmari, Moipeeth, Satjelia, and now at Gosaba.

Tigers are crossing the net that separates the forested regions from human habitation and straying long distances away from their original habitat.

Historical Records of Human-Tiger Conflict

Tiger-human conflict is common at Sundarbans and deep-rooted in its history. The mass settlement in this region began only during the British colonial period (1860- 1947). Hence, there were no traditional forest communities in the region.

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Reclamation of islands started around 1903 under the cooperative initiative of Sir Daniel Mackinnon Hamilton. He started the initiative with 4,047 hectares. Socio-economically marginalised people were transported to the Indo-Gangetic delta from different regions of India, Bangladesh and Myanmar. The British Raj represented Sundarbans tigers as man-eaters and a hindrance to their reclamation drive. Records indicate that during the second half of the 19th Century, tigers used to kill

around 1,600 people and 136-272 kg of cattle annually.

The government notification dated November 16, 1883 published in the Calcutta Gazette orders forest officers to reward the killing of tigers. During the colonial period, the tiger killing was encouraged.

Conservation Initiatives After Independence

Sundarban Tigers are unique from other habitats, which were recognised after the Independence. These diurnal tide-washed islands are designated as ‘Tiger Project’ in 1973, UNESCO world heritage site in 1987, and Biosphere Reserve in 1989 covering an area of about 9,630 square kilometers. It is home to about 96 tigers and 4.6 million people. Studies show the ecotourism income rose from Rs 15 lakh in 2003-04 to Rs 117.7 lakh in 2012-13. Ecotourism around the flagship species is a source of revenue to the forest department and the local communities. With joint forest management initiatives, locals have been actively taking part in the conservation initiatives of the forest department.

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The Fear of Tiger and ‘Cult’

The fear of tigers still persists. Communities coped with this fear through the belief in the folk cult of ‘Bon-bibi’ and the tiger visage demon adversary- The ‘Dokhin Rai’. The myth revolves around ‘Dokhin Rai’ or tiger ruling the forested islands, whereas ‘Bon bibi’ protecting the honey gatherers, fisherman entering mangrove lands. This fear transcends generations and gets magnified by years of the human-tiger conflict. Tiger widows are a reality in Indian Sundarbans who have lost male members of their families to tiger attacks.

Mangrove Tiger’s Behaviour

Behavioural adaptation of Sundarban tigers makes them distinct from other meta-populations. These felines are excellent swimmers, can climb trees, have a home range of 57-110 square km, preying on deer and wild boar. They can also survive on monkeys, fish and crustaceans. The diurnal tidal flows wash away the territory marking pheromones of male tigers resulting in more mating competitions. Their yellow and black striped coat is a perfect camouflage amongst mangrove thickets and straw-coloured leaves of Hetal or Phoenix paludosa, a mangrove palm. Tiger has an acute sense of hearing and can perceive sounds up to 60 kHz, whereas a normal human can sense only 20 kHz. There is rarely any fresh water in these hypersaline regions, hence water is a constrain for the tigers, which they mostly get from their prey’s blood. Humans transgressing on forests are easy prey for the tigers.

Tiger Straying During the Pandemic

Since the pandemic, the cases of tiger attacks have been increasing with six deaths in 2020. The reason was the human transgression in reserve forests to augment income lost to pandemics. The year 2020 saw a minimum ecotourist influx in the region due to the lockdown. A possibility is with limited sound from ecotourists, launch, and steamers over the last one year, tigers got emboldened and started straying from their native habitat. Tiger populations are increasing, but as per the 2015 India State of Forest Report, Sundarbans had only an 8 sq. km rise in forest cover. Hence, tigers may be transgressing out to occupy new territories. Dense mangroves make it difficult for the tigers to spot their usual prey and entice them to look for easier alternatives. With rice crop cut down, the voices of cattle can easily woo out hungry tigers from forests.

Conservation Concern

Tiger straying is following the mangrove reforested patches. This is resurrecting the age-old fear amongst the local population that mangrove plantations can invite tigers into their homes. The situation must be handled carefully, otherwise, it will be difficult to gain local support in any mangrove restoration activities. Mangroves not only provide blue carbon sequestration service but also protects the islands during natural disasters.

The author is associate professor at Jindal School of Environment and Sustainability, OP Jindal Global University,

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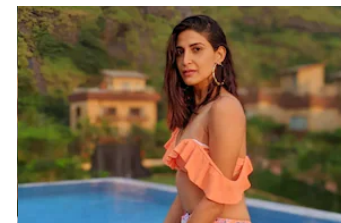
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Sonipat, and researches on environmental pollution, wildlife conservation problems of the sub-continent. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not represent the stand of this publication.

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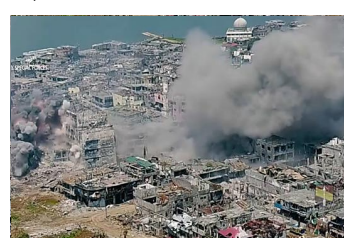
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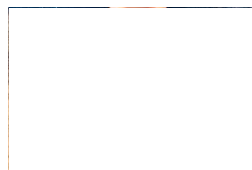
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India's Ageing Population Has More Women but Systemic Inequality Will Hurt Them More than Men



Since women face inequalities in access to health interventions, a gendered approach to intervention development would ensure that women experience healthy ageing. (Representational Image: Shutterstock)

Female workforce participation must be encouraged so that the future generations of older women can become economically independent.

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NEHA CHAUHAN

India has nearly 67% of its population in the 15 to 64 years age group. As a result, the policy focus has mainly been on how to reap the benefits of the country's demographic dividend. However, the policy discussions often miss the future implications of such an age structure of the population.

The population of elderly persons aged 60 years and above has steadily increased since 1961. This is mainly attributed to improvement in economic well-being and healthcare facilities, leading to declining death rates, falling fertility rates, and rising life expectancy. According to the Report of the Technical Group on Population Projections, India's elderly population is currently estimated to be around 13.8 crore. This number is expected to be close to 19.3 crore in 2031.

Furthermore, according to the Census 2021 projections, the elderly female and male populations stood close to 7.1 crore and 6.7 crore, respectively. This indicates that elderly females outnumber their male counterparts. This outnumbering is projected to strengthen with time. The larger population of elderly females is a sign of feminisation of the elderly population in the

country, which brings its own unique set of challenges.

Economic Concerns

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Despite India's significant economic progress in recent decades, women's economic participation is low. According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey 2019-20, women's labour force participation rate was lower than men in all the age groups. For instance, for women aged 15 years and above, the labour force participation rate was around 30%. For men in the same age bracket, this rate was around 77%.

The underrepresentation of women in paid work has long term implications. One of them is that older women are less likely to have savings and financial support such as pension or retirement benefits. Therefore, they are economically dependent on others. As per the NSS 75th Round, only 10% of elderly women in rural areas and 11% of elderly women in urban areas were economically independent. Elderly men fared much better than elderly women in this aspect.

Figure 1: Percentage distribution of the elderly population by the state of economic independence

Source: NSS Report no. 586 - Health in India

According to the recent Global Gender Gap Report, India ranks 135th out of 156 countries in wage equality for similar work. Lower lifetime earnings due to the pervasive gender wage gap imply that even the small percentage of women who receive wages for their work will have less money saved for retirement than men.

Women also require financial knowledge to have a financially secure future. Unfortunately, financial illiteracy is particularly pronounced among women, leaving them at a disadvantage. According to a recent report, only 20% of women in India can be considered financially literate.






Globally, life expectancy for males was nearly five years lower than for females. In India, in 2019, the life expectancy of males and females stood at 69.5 years and 72.2 years, respectively. When women's longer life expectancy is taken into account, the economic concerns become even more critical to address. This is because longer life expectancy implies that women need a larger pool of savings than men.

Social Concerns

India is home to the highest number of widows in the world. According to the World Widows Report from the Loomba Foundation, there are close to 5 crore widowed women in India. Due to the rising population of elderly women and the longer life expectancy of women in general, the prevalence of widowhood among women is expected only to increase. While widowhood is associated with complexities for both men and women, women tend to be more adversely affected. Widowed women suffer social stigmatisation and discrimination. Additionally, the pattern of residence in the country is mainly patrilocal. This isolates widows and adds to their social and economic marginalisation.

Furthermore, inheritance norms in the country favour men over women. Asset ownership and the right to property are essential for women's social and economic well-being, and once widowed, women often confront denial of these rights.

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Elderly women are largely dependent on their families for their social well-being. With the nuclearisation of families gaining traction and increasing migration of the working-age group population to cities, elderly women are also facing long periods of social isolation. Adding to the vulnerability of elderly women is the abuse and ill-treatment that they face. This abuse deprives them of leading a dignified life. Adding to their perils, women are disadvantaged compared to men when it comes to access to education. Due to this, elderly women are likely to be unaware of their rights and laws which are there to help them.

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Health Concerns

Along with a changing population structure, India is also going through an epidemiological transition. This refers to a move from a disease pattern dominated by infectious diseases to one dominated by non-communicable diseases (NCDs). NCDs include chronic respiratory diseases, heart ailments, diabetes, etc., and their prevalence increases with age. This indicates that India is shifting a large share of the country's burden of disease to the older population.

In order to experience healthy ageing, women need to have access to affordable and adequate healthcare services throughout their lives. Unfortunately, this has not been the case for Indian women. Due to the inequality in access to education, Indian women are likely to be unaware of health risk factors. Furthermore, they are also less likely to engage in healthcare-seeking behaviour. This coincides with the observation that healthcare expenditure on females is systematically lower than on males across all demographic and socio-economic groups.

The breakdown of the joint family structure has meant that traditional family-based care is also not as readily available as it was in the past. The trend of elderly living alone or living only with a spouse is increasing, especially in urban areas. This means that the elderly population's traditional support system is weakening, and they will have lesser access to care in the future.

Way Forward: Closing Gender Gaps

With an increasingly female ageing population, India needs to implement policies that ensure gender equity for the elderly population. The challenges faced by elderly women are primarily due to the gender-based discrimination experienced by them throughout their lives. In order to ensure healthy and secure aging for women, it is critical to have policies that are aimed at closing the gender gaps that exist at all stages of the life course.

Female workforce participation must be encouraged so that the future generations of older women can become economically independent. Since a significant chunk of the work women undertake, such as their unpaid care work, is not formally recognised, they remain ineligible for many social protection programmes. Therefore, gender-responsive social protection schemes that consider such vulnerabilities are the need of the hour. Taking steps to improve literacy levels among women will help in increasing the awareness and uptake of such schemes. This will help women enhance their financial security at old age.

While it is true that the prevalence of NCDs is increasing in India, infectious diseases still pose significant challenges to the public health system. This causes India to bear a double burden of disease. The country's health policies need to be redesigned so that both categories of diseases get due attention from policymakers. Since women face inequalities in access to health interventions, a gendered approach to intervention development would ensure that women experience healthy ageing.

The author is a research associate at SPRF, a policy think tank seeking to make public policy research holistic and accessible. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not represent the stand of this publication.

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